

## 2.0 Overview of the Borough



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### 2.1 Introduction to the Borough

**2.1.1** The Borough of Christchurch forms the most easterly section of the County of Dorset and South West Region, with Bournemouth to the west. East Dorset District adjoins the Borough to the north west. To the east the Borough borders the New Forest District in Hampshire. The Borough covers an area of some 50 sq km. Of this roughly 70% remains as open Countryside, Harbour or Coast. With the attractions of the south coast environment the built up area has developed along the coastal frontage and immediate hinterland. Much of the built up area is in the form of low-rise suburban post war residential development around small cores of older settlements.

**2.1.3** Inland, the Countryside is currently split between areas of open agricultural landscapes in the east and more enclosed wooded landscape to the west.

**2.1.4** Bournemouth International Airport and the A338 dual carriageway route into Bournemouth are set within the countryside in the north western part of the Borough.

### 2.2 Evolution of the Landscape

**2.2.1** The soft underlying geology, deposits of glacial alluvial materials and changing sea levels have left a low lying landscape with only gentle variations in topography. Evidence of early settlement can be traced in the higher ground in strategic positions close to the harbour and between the main rivers.

**2.2.2** The clearance of the woodland cover opened up a contrast between the deep alluvial soils of the valleys and thinner soils on the higher ground. The valleys provided the most versatile agricultural land with well-drained terraces and fertile floodplains. These were farmed as open common until the advent of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Parliamentary Enclosure of the Landscape. The poorer soils through the centre of the Borough became heathland following Bronze Age clearance. It is assumed as with much of the Dorset Heaths, the heathland areas in the centre of the Borough, were established by 500 BC. The establishment of coniferous plantations across the earlier heathland came with the creation of the Forestry Commission in the 1950's.

**2.2.3** Although an historic Borough, the tangible archaeological interest of the Borough is quite concentrated. Within the rural area the high ground of St. Catherine's Hill contains no less than 11 scheduled ancient monuments within a square kilometre. At a wider level, although remains of ancient heathland and localised patches of ancient woodland exist within the Borough, the landscape is essentially a 'modern' landscape created during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**2.2.4** The development of the built up area has been influenced by the coastal setting, topography and river flood plains.

**2.2.5** The urban area is again a predominantly modern, post war, environment. The historic core of Christchurch is the saxon burh and subsequent medieval market town. The surrounding neighbourhoods were built up around a scatter of smaller villages or hamlets along the main transport routes radiating out from Christchurch town centre.

**2.2.6** The position of Christchurch in the heart of the south coast has acted as a magnet for people in retirement. Much of the modern development has taken the form of low or moderate density, low rise residential estates. With the earliest phases of the development dating from the pre and immediate post war era, many areas now have a well established and mature character.

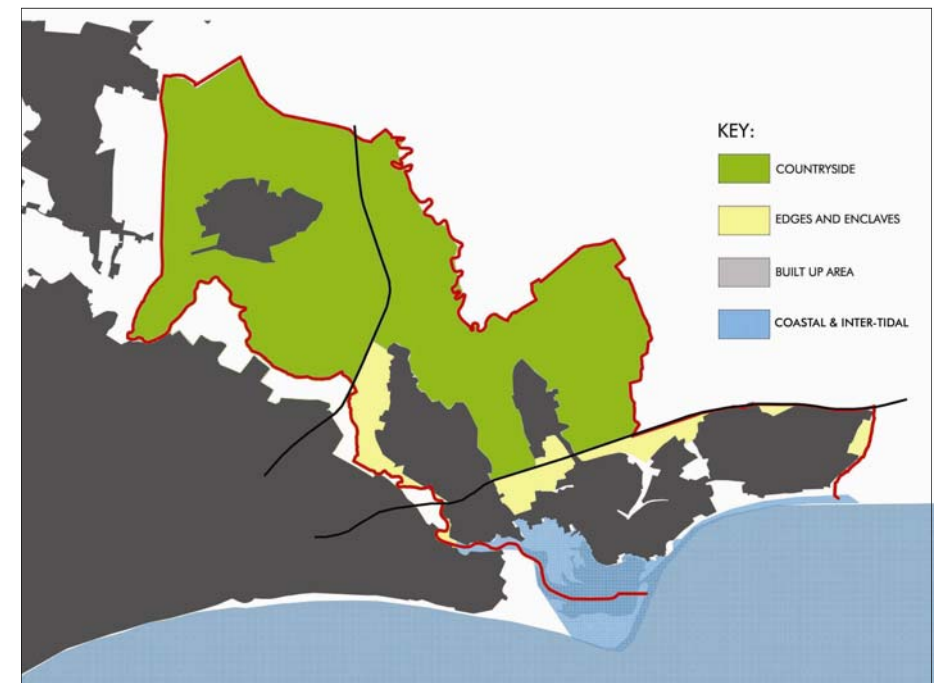
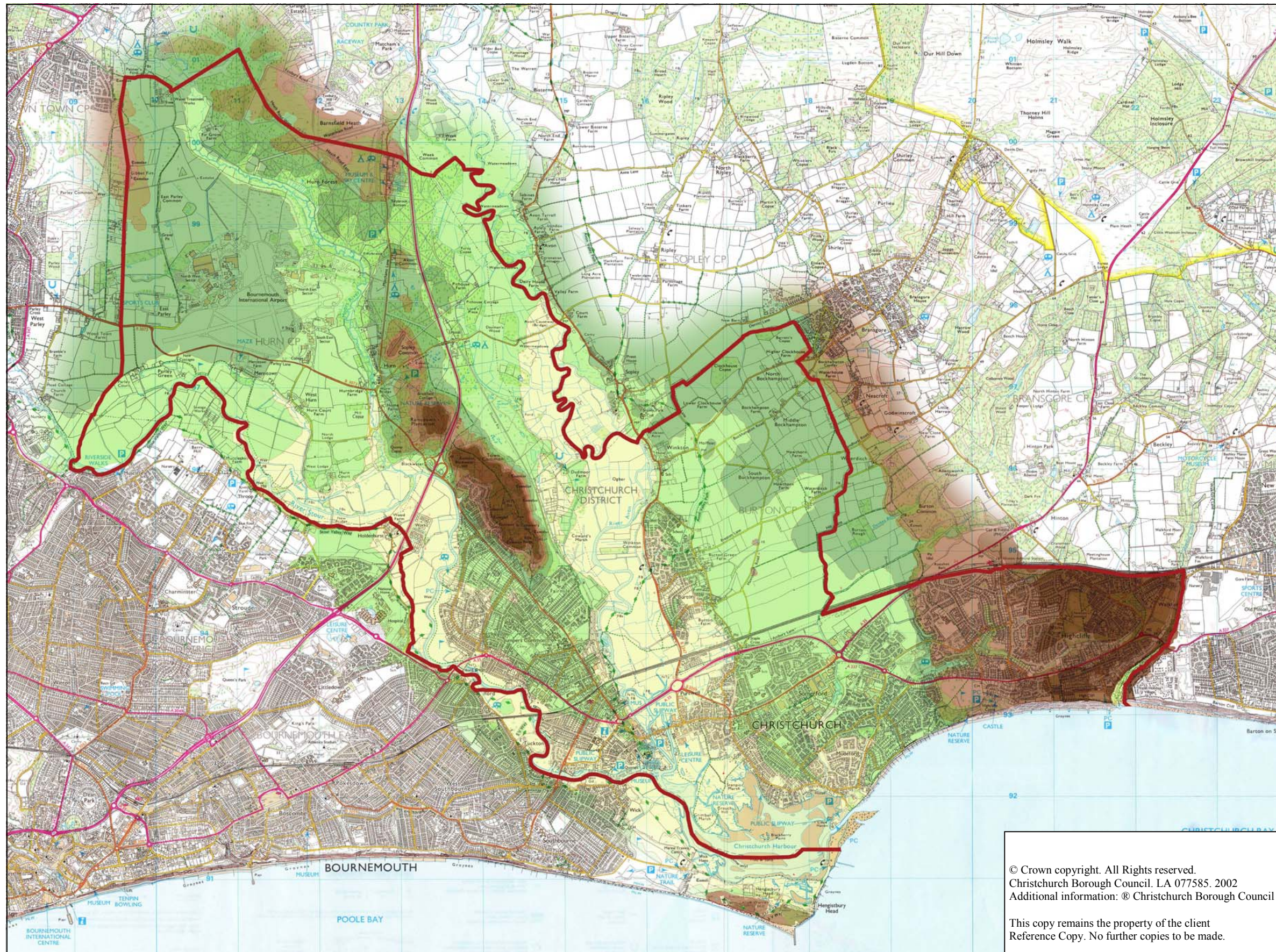


Figure 2.1





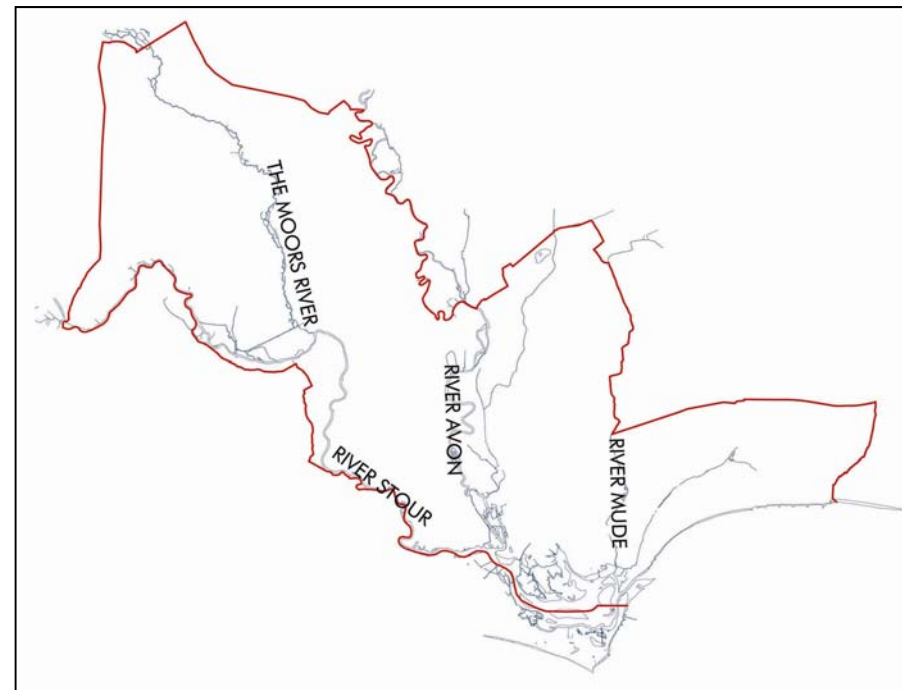


Figure 2.3

### 2.3 Topography and Drainage

**2.3.1** The landscape and settlement pattern of the Borough has been shaped, and heavily influenced by topography and drainage. **Figures 2.2 and 2.3** illustrate the local topography and principal rivers. The topography is formed by two low-lying wide scale river valleys, The Avon and The Stour. Both have extensive river flood plains. A subtle ridge of high ground forms a north/south axis through the Borough. St Catherine's Hill forms the highest part of the ridge at 45m above sea level (AOD). This spine of high ground has been eroded away within the harbour area where the two rivers converge. However, the ridge reappears on the coast as the area of Hengistbury Head (36m AOD).

**2.3.2** The River Avon flows into the Borough from Salisbury and Ringwood to the north. The Stour flows into the Borough from Wimborne to the north west and forms part of the boundary between Christchurch and the wider built up area of Bournemouth. Both rivers have a meandering course with minor tributaries and side channels set within low flood plains. Extensive areas of flat landscape sit above the flood plains as 'terraces' of deep alluvial deposits. A smaller river, the Moors, has formed a more incised small-scale course along the western edge of the Hurn Forest. The River Mude and the Walkford Brook are small scale water courses that drain the eastern side of the Borough. Both have relatively

limited local catchment areas. Much of the main river flood plain areas lie below 5m AOD. Flooding in these areas can be exacerbated by tidal conditions within Christchurch Harbour. Low-lying parts of the town are therefore protected by flood defences.

### 2.4 Vegetation and Habitat Patterns

**2.4.1** Whilst the Borough consists of managed man-made landscapes, there are patterns of vegetation and habitat types that respond to the underlying morphology of the area.

**2.4.2** These patterns relate to the thin soil of the ridgelines and high ground, riparian habitats and the river terraces and flood plains. The natural harbour and coastal fringe also have their own distinct habitat pattern.

**2.4.3** With the clearance of the original woodland cover the thinner soils were exposed to the leaching of soil nutrients leaving the areas too infertile for agricultural use. Prior to the enclosure movement the Dorset Heaths were used for rough grazing and turf cutting. Some heathland reclamation occurred between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but many areas were again abandoned during the agricultural depression of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The natural cover of heathers, bracken, and gorse on these areas is supplemented by oak woodland on commons in the eastern part of the Borough and coniferous forests on the central ridgeline. The heathland areas are protected by nature conservation designations. Species such as sand lizards, smooth snakes, the Dartford Warbler and Nightjar are found within the heathland areas. The Dorset County Heathland Strategy has been prepared to help promote positive management of the County's heathland areas.

**2.4.4** The deeper alluvial soils of the river terraces and flood plains are more suited to agricultural production. These are more heavily managed landscapes of pasture and arable production.

**2.4.5** All three main rivers are fed from chalk upland areas to the north. The generally high water quality, condition and natural chemistry of the water courses support rich collections of flora and fauna. The River Avon and significant areas of adjacent water meadows are protected by national and international status nature conservation designations. This interest extends into the estuary area of Christchurch Harbour. Areas of salt marsh and wet meadows are protected for their biodiversity and great ornithological interest.



**2.4.6** These characteristic patterns are most evident in the open countryside areas of the Borough. However, the distinctive patterns also permeate the built-up area and indeed help bring some subtle variations and sense of place to various parts of the Borough. On the river terrace areas close to The Stour old hedgerow oaks from the original 19<sup>th</sup> Century enclosure fields persist within the housing areas. Pockets of wetland willow scrub enclose new housing areas close to Purewell and extensive areas of woodland commons have been retained within the built-up area of Highcliffe.

**2.4.7** Non-native trees such as Holm Oak and Maritime Pines have been widely introduced to the area. As species which thrive in coastal locations they have become well-established in the character of the local townscape and as a dominant element in the coastal fringe.

## 2.5 Agricultural Management

**2.5.1** The countryside area of the Borough is roughly divided into 45% agricultural farmland and 35% forest and heathland.

**2.5.2** The agricultural management is predominantly livestock grazing with localised areas of arable production concentrated on the drier more manageable soils of the river terraces. The Avon Valley has been designated by Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) as an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA). The designation aims to protect the traditional pastoral landscape management of the valley through grant aid support to farmers. The designation extends up the valley through the neighbouring districts of East Dorset, New Forest and into the Salisbury District in Wiltshire. The extent of the designation within Christchurch is illustrated in **Figure 3.5** (See Section 3.0).

**2.5.3** On the eastern side of the Borough the extent of agricultural landscape is fragmented by the presence of the airport, river and major roads. The traditional agricultural landscape with sheep and cattle is in places replaced by equestrian grazing. Almost all the agricultural landscape is under some form of positive management. However, small areas of water meadow on the outskirts of the built-up area appear to be under-managed or possibly abandoned.

## 2.6 Settlement and Transport

**2.6.1** The historic core of the Town Centre developed around the Priory and castle. These were strategically positioned at the confluence of the two main rivers on the edge of the natural harbour. The subsequent growth of the town followed the shallow ridge of high ground heading out to St Catherine's Hill.

**2.6.2** A route north out from the Priory follows the line of high ground to form the modern High Street and main road out towards Hurn and Ringwood. A second route out of the town to the east provides one of the few historical crossings of the River Avon.

**2.6.3** The difficulties in building or crossing the flood plain areas has resulted in divided areas of settlement and limited east/west routes within the Borough. The main routes north within the Avon Valley can be seen to relate closely to the edge of the natural river flood plain. The villages of Burton and Winkton developed alongside this historically strategic route.

**2.6.4** The settlement pattern pre-1900 extended out around the eastern fringe of the harbour as sporadic clusters of cottages between Stanpit and Mundeford. A further small hamlet had also developed around the commons of Highcliffe.

**2.6.5** The introduction of the railway through the Borough with a station to the north of the main Town Centre heralded the start of the rapid modern expansion of the built up area. The station and branch line to Ringwood provided a focus for expansion out towards St Catherine's Hill. A workhouse and cemetery marked the outskirts of the town in the 1890's. Subsequent waves of 20th Century suburban development consolidated the urban expansion across the area of Jumpers Common.

**2.6.6** To the east of Christchurch the villages of Purewell, Stanpit and Mundeford have expanded into one general neighbourhood. An aerodrome built on the outer edge of the settlement in 1935 has been redeveloped as light industrial, employment and residential land. Highcliffe forms a further neighbourhood of predominantly post war development contained between the railway and the sea.

**2.6.7** The modern road network serves a strong east/west axis through the built-up area. The historic core of the Town Centre was by-passed in 1958. The route of the A35 crosses the River Avon to the north of Bargates. Significant volumes of local traffic use this



corridor to pass between the eastern part of the Borough and the New Forest, through to Bournemouth and Poole to the west. With few other opportunities to cross the Avon Valley, the traffic is forced through the built-up area and concentrated on to only three possible routes over the River Stour to Bournemouth. To the east Lymington Road through Highcliffe provides a strategic route between the Borough and the settlements of New Milton and Lymington in the New Forest.

**2.6.8** A further strategic through route, the A338 passes through the Borough as the main link between the M27 and Bournemouth.

**2.6.9** The Railway provides a further east/west axis through the borough. Elevated on an embankment across the Avon Valley the line forms a dominant feature through open landscape on the edge of the built-up area.



## 2.7 Post War Planning Control

**2.7.1** The continued outward expansion of the built-up area has been controlled in recent years by the planning system. The general open land around the settlements and all of the wider countryside has been protected since the 1950's by Green Belt designation, part of the much wider South East Dorset Green Belt. This designation has the primary aim of maintaining open land around the conurbation and preventing the further coalescence of settlements.

**2.7.2** With the restrictions on outward growth, there has already been a long term pressure within the Borough for redevelopment, infill and increased development densities.

**2.7.3** Within the general expanse of the built-up area, the original scatter of pre-1900 settlements remain as pockets of noticeably older and more distinctive townscape. Within the existing local plans they have been identified and protected by Conservation Area status. This designation seeks to ensure the essential character of such areas are preserved or enhanced when new development proposals come forward. In all there are 12 Conservation Areas within the Borough. In addition, listed building or ancient monument status protects individual buildings and other historic structures.

## 2.8 Recreation, Leisure and Tourism

**2.8.1** The Borough provides the potential for a wide range of

recreational opportunities. Some assets, such as the beaches and harbour are a vital part of the local tourism offer. Others, such as local green spaces, form part of the everyday recreational resource for local people. The distribution, extent and condition of these various assets are relevant to the wider perceptions of the Borough's character and the local quality of the townscapes. The presence of holiday caravan parks within the built-up area helps define Christchurch as a holiday resort. The juxtaposition of beach caravan parks within residential areas creates a contrast with the generally private setting of post war housing areas.

**2.8.2** In areas of the Borough, there are issues of exclusivity that prevent visitors or the public generally having access to some of the key assets, such as water frontage or views.

**2.8.3** The general density of the housing around the Borough has left many areas deficient in terms of the normal standards for open space provision. By way of compensation, easy access to the coastal frontage and rural hinterland provide some areas with the more dynamic settings of seascape and landscape immediately next to the built-up area.

**2.8.4** Access out from the town into wider countryside is available. However, key sections of the rural landscape are not well served by rights of way or good access. Measures to improve the footpaths and cycleway network have been developed under a 'greenways' initiative undertaken by the Borough Council, in conjunction with the Countryside Agency.

## 2.9 Nature Conservation

**2.9.1** A significant proportion of the Borough is protected by some form of Nature Conservation designation. The status of designation range from those of local importance right through to international level protection.

**2.9.2** The Dorset Heathlands and Avon Valley are designated as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in recognition of their importance to specific bird species.

**2.9.3** The Avon Valley, Town Common and Parley Common are also designated as Ramsar sites as they are important wetland or waterfowl habitats. The Dorset heathlands and River Avon are also proposed/designated as candidate Special Areas of Conservation (cSAC).





**2.9.4** A number of these international status designations overlap with Sites of Special Scientific Interest designations (SSSI) within the Borough. Ten SSSIs are identified and described in the Local Plan. These include:

1. **Avon Valley** : Has a great range of habitat diversity and a more diverse flora and fauna than any other chalk river valley in Britain. Also excellent ornithological interest.
2. **Hurn Common** : Consists of expanses of dry and wet heathland. Even though fragmented it forms one of the largest areas of heathland in Dorset.
3. **St Leonards and St Ives Heath** : Similar in characteristics to Hurn Common.
4. **Moors River** : A chalk stream in its higher reaches, flowing through clay lower down. The varied physical and chemical nature of the river results in rich flora and fauna.
5. **Parley Common** : Contains the characteristics and rare species associated with Dorset heathlands.
6. **Town Common/St. Catherine's Hill Nature Reserve** : Internationally rare habitat with rare species associated with Dorset Heathlands. Includes St Catherine's Hill with its dry heaths, the lower area holds wet heath and pools. The land is managed as a nature reserve.
7. **Purewell Meadows** : A series of wet meadows with a system of fields and ditches containing a range of plant habitats. The area is partly managed by Christchurch Borough Countryside Service.
8. **Christchurch Harbour** : Formed by the Rivers Stour and Avon, the varied habitat of the estuary includes salt marsh and wet meadows and is of great ornithological interest.
9. **Highcliffe to Milford** : Consists of cliffs along Christchurch Bay, designated because of the rock formations and fossils found along its length.
10. **River Avon System** : The River Avon is richer and more varied than most chalk streams with over 180 species of aquatic plant recorded - one of the most diverse fish faunas in Britain and a wide range of aquatic invertebrates.

**2.9.5** Designated Local Nature Reserves are established by local authorities, often to help promote public access or interpretation of wildlife sites. The Stanpit Marsh LNR designation overlaps with the SSSI status of Christchurch Harbour, but identifies an area specifically managed by the Authority to preserve both public access and its wildlife interest.

**2.9.6** Other small scale sites of Nature Conservation Interest and green corridors are also identified within the local plan. Many of these are found within the built-up area and contribute to the general quality of the local environment.

## 2.10 Minerals

**2.10.1** While significant mineral extraction occurs within Dorset as a whole, there are no significant historic or currently active mineral workings within the borough. There are, however, two areas identified for significant mineral extraction operations in the future. One site close to the village of Hurn has outline/detail approval for gravel extraction. The second is an allocated site between the A338, and the River Avon flood plain.

**2.10.2** As sites recently allocated through the County Minerals and Waste Local Plan, both operations have been (are) subjected to Environmental Assessment and both have prescribed after use conditions. These operations will have both direct landscape and visual impact implications during the life time of the extraction and restoration operations. With careful restoration the resultant new landscapes may offer new positive landscapes or nature conservation opportunities. The implications of these allocations is discussed in the corresponding landscape character areas sections within Section 3.0 of this study.

## 2.11 Countryside and Conservation Policy

**2.11.1** The natural environment of the Borough is protected by a range of environmental policies set out in the Local Plan. Many of them give protection in terms of limiting noise, pollution or waste, or restriction on development that may impact on nature conservation interests. The countryside has been conserved at least in part by the blanket coverage provided by the Green Belt and Nature Conservation Policies. The former designation is not based on any form of landscape quality or character assessment, but merely reflects the extent of open (underdeveloped) land within the Borough.



## 2.11 Countryside and Conservation Policy cont ..

**2.11.2** There is no specific countryside protection policy within the Local Plan, and no special landscape areas have been designated in either the county structure plan or at the Local Plan level.

**2.11.3** The ESA designation within the Avon Valley is a positive landscape protection and enhancement programme administered and funded by DEFRA. The countryside in the eastern side of the Borough has been identified by the Countryside Agency as part of the proposed New Forest National Park. If this proceeds, the area involved would be placed within a National Status designation. This area could also then be encompassed within the bid for World Heritage status as sought for the existing New Forest Heritage Area.

